Misgivings about the Religious Pluralisms of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and John Hick

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Synopsis of the argument for religious pluralism, with a counter argument, including a discussion on the Divine and Human elements of religion, Christianity, religious diversity, and denying the cultural relativity of religion.

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point

Muhammad Legenhausen

on ۲۵ October ۱۹۹۴, the Turkish scholar Adnan Aslan interviewed Profs. Nasr and Hick at the home of John Hick in Birmingham. The topic of discussion was religious pluralism, about which Dr. Aslan was writing his doctoral dissertation. Later Dr. Aslan published a book in which he compares the ideas of Profs. Nasr and Hick on religious pluralism. Unfortunately, I have not yet had the opportunity to see this work, but the interview, which was published in the Islamic Quarterly,(۱) is quite thought provoking.

Here follows a brief summary of the discussion, and then comments and criticisms. By

commenting on it, I hope to clarify my own views about religious pluralism and to gain some understanding about the resources available to Muslims for explaining the .plurality of religions

Synopsis of the Discussion

Perhaps the strangest thing about the discussion is the point with which John Hick begins. He notes that both he and Dr. Nasr agree on the truth of different religions, but observes the main difference between them is that Hick sees this as requiring .reform, while Nasr wants to leave the traditions alone

What then unfolds is the odd spectacle

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۱- Adrian Aslan, The Islamic Quarterly, Vol. ۴۰, No. ۴, (۱۹۹۶), ۲۶۶-۲۸۳.. The translation of this interview into Persian by Ahmadrida Jalai appeared in Marifat, No. ۲۳, (Winter ۱۳۷۶/۱۹۹۸) ۷۰-۷۹.

of a Christian cleric who would reform Christianity by denying the Trinity being advised by a Muslim sage that the doctrine of the Trinity must not be abandoned by Christians. Such an ironic turn of events is surely a sign that the end times are near!

Nasr states that while Hick sees the differences among religion to be due to human factors, he sees them as divinely ordained because of human differences. Nasr will admit a need for reform but only to the extent necessary to dispel the sense of absoluteness harbored by exclusivists.

According to Hick, the concepts of omnipotence, omniscience, and many others that are taken to indicate attributes of God are entirely human products which do not accurately describe what he prefers to call the infinite or the ultimate as it is in-itself.

Nasr responds that the ways in which God describes Himself in revelation are not human inventions, and must not be subject to any supposed program of reform. He claims that change in religion must be gradual and organic or natural, although he hastens to add that there can be no change in the immutable divine laws of Islam or Judaism.

The distinction Nasr makes between those aspects of religion in which acceptable organic change is possible and those aspects which are immutable prompts Hick to ask how the difference can be discerned. Hick's primary concern here is with Christian claims about the divinity of Christ (`a). Is this to be seen as an essential element of Christianity or

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?as an accretion to be reformed

Nasr does not provide any criterion by which to distinguish the immutable from the reformable, but insists that God would not allow a major religion to rest on a single mistake for two thousand years. Nasr goes so far as to assert that even if historical documents could prove that Christ (`a,) and his Apostles did not believe in the doctrines of the Trinity or Incarnation, such doctrines were divinely willed for later .Christians

Hick responds that the idea of God's not allowing fundamental error to persist in a major religion to which Nasr appeals presupposes a personification of the Ultimate which Hick finds unacceptable. For Hick, the concept of the divine will is merely a human response to the Ultimate. After some cross-examination by Hick, Nasr accepts that the concept of divine will is applicable to certain manifestations of the Real rather than to the Real in itself, although he also contends that the Divine takes into .consideration, i.e., wills, the way in which It will become manifest

If this discussion exposes a difficulty in Nasr's thought, the going gets rougher in the next exchange, in which Nasr apparently denies the principle of non-contradiction. He claims that although the Christian and Islamic descriptions of Christ are contradictory, they are nevertheless both true, and admits that this is "very difficult from a ".rationalistic point of view

Nasr next alludes to different perspectives and different "levels of knowing" by means of which the contradiction could be resolved, but he

does not explain how Christ could be crucified on one level and not on another. He claims that only an elite of advanced thinkers will be able to understand his claims, and he compares the situation with that of astronomical knowledge. Nasr also explains the differences among religions in terms of the intellectual climates during .which the religions emerged

Christianity had to confront Greco-Roman rationalism, which was no threat to Arabia in the years leading up to the coming of Islam. The differences between what Christianity and Islam say about Christ (`a) are thus, according to Nasr, due to the different functions played by Christ (`a) in the two religions in order to lead the people .of different cultural and historical environments to salvation

The discussion becomes even more confused when Hick asks whether such absolute claims within the religions have not often caused them to go to war. Instead of separating the moral and metaphysical questions, Nasr responds that most modern wars have been prompted by secular ideologies (fascism, nationalism, communism). Hick protests that religions often contribute to divisiveness and Nasr answers that the .differences among religions confirm the existence of different human collectivities

Then both Hick and Nasr agree that religions should get rid of their claims to be the one and only truth, Nasr reasserts his communal relativism with the claim that exclusivist statements attributed to Christ are meant only for Christians, not for .Muslims and vice versa

"Hick agrees, "No one comes to the Father but through me

is only to be true for the Christians, not universally. This denial of universality is also accepted by Nasr with respect to Islam, and he claims that Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rums had the same idea. Hick agrees that the sufi element of Islam has always been .pluralistic

Aslan next asks who can be saved. Hick responds that anyone who is empty of self and open to the Ultimate is saved. Nasr, first affirms his belief in a Qur'anic eschatology, but then he claims that the different eschatology of all the religions are ."correct in their own spiritual universe." Hick agrees

Finally, on the issue of religion and science, both Nasr and Hick agree that science .cannot guide theology

Comments on the Discussion

point

Since I have already provided a fairly lengthy critique of the pluralism advocated by John Hick,(۱) in these comments I am more interested in the view advocated by Dr. Nasr. Through his vigorous defense of Islamic thought and culture in a long series of eloquent and erudite articles and books, Dr. Nasr has emerged as the most eminent .Muslim intellectual in the U. S

No one else has defended Islam with the quality and quantity of his writings in English. Hence, what Dr. Nasr has to say about the important topic of religious pluralism, (۲)at the very least, will have serious consequences for the way Islam is understood in .America, and the rest of the English speaking world

Religious Pluralism and Sophia Perennis

The approach taken by Dr. Nasr is that of the perennial philosophy he has advocated for years, with

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Muhammad Legenhausen, "Islam and Religious Pluralism," Al-Tawhid, Vol. ۱۴, No. ۳; -۱

(Fall ۱۹۹۷), ۱۱۵-۱۵۴. The Persian translation of this article by Muhammad Husaynzadeh and Narjiss Javandel appeared in Nos. ۲۲ and ۲۳ of Marifat (Fall and Winter ۱۳۷۶/۱۹۹۷-۹۸).

۲- Nasr also discusses the topic of religious pluralism in his Religion and Religions: The Challenge of Living in the Multireligious World (Charlotte: The University of North Carolina Press, ۱۹۸۵); "Principal Knowledge and the Multiplicity of Sacred Forms," Ch. ۹ of Knowledge and the Sacred, (Albany: SUNY Press, ۱۹۹۱), ۲۸۰-۳۰۸; "Islam and the Encounter of Religions," in Sufi Essays, ۲nd ed., (Albany: SUNY Press, ۱۹۹۱), ۱۲۳-۱۵۱; and most recently, "Religion and Religions," Ch. ۱ of Religion and the Order of Nature (New York: Oxford University Press, ۱۹۶۶), ۹-۲۸.

acknowledgments -of the works of Frithjof Schuon. With regard to the topic of religious pluralism, the most important work of Schuon is his very first book, The (Transcendent Unity of Religions.(۱

This book expands on a theme common among the `urafa- of Islam, that the divine religions are different only in their external aspects, but have the same interiors Schuon's ideas may be further traced to Rene Guenon (۱۸۸۶-۱۹۵۱) who appears to have initiated the school of thought associated with the advocacy of sophia perennis or philosophia perennis. The basic idea of this school is that all the religions are ultimately saying the same thing but in different ways, but that to see this universal .core, one must turn from the exoteric to the esoteric aspects of the religions

Given this background, one of the most prominent differences between the approach taken by Hick and Nasr to the plurality of religions is that for Hick the problem is first and foremost stereological and moral, and subsequently epistemological and metaphysical, while for Nasr religious diversity is primarily a metaphysical or (more specifically) a theosophical problem, although he does not ignore its epistemological .and moral dimensions

Hick begins with traditional Christian exclusivism, the doctrine that there is no salvation outside the church (extra ecclesiam nulla salus), which he finds unacceptable because he cannot believe that the good people of non-Christian traditions of faith will not be saved. The rejection of the traditional Christian doctrine ,of salvation has major implications for theology and religious epistemology

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First published in French as De L'Unite Transcendante Des Religions (Paris: Editions -۱ Gallimard, ۱۹۴۸), a revised edition of the English translation by Peter Townsend was published in ۱۹۷۵ by Harper and Row. Also worthy of note is Frithjof Schuon, Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenicism (Bloomington: World Wisdom .(Books, ۱۹۸۵

.to which Hick has devoted considerable attention for more than twenty years

For Nasr, on the other hand, a pluralistic acceptance of the esoteric unity of all religions is a core feature of the perennial philosophy, and is merely one more aspect of the relationship between the One and the many which is to be found in so many .variations among the writings of the sufis

Perhaps the attitudes of both Nasr and Hick toward the multiplicity of religions are outgrowths of nineteenth century romanticism, for Guenon's teachings on the philosophia perennis arose out of the occultist circles of Paris in which a romantic view of the orient was itself hardly exotic, while Hick's ideas are founded on a liberal .Protestant ethos which can be traced to Schleiermacher's romanticism

But romantic optimism plays decidedly different roles in the two contemporary thinkers, so that Hick sees himself as leading a movement of theological reform within Christianity that will lead Christians to have more tolerance for others, while Nasr is led to an optimistic reading of traditional beliefs of all the major religions without any .modernizing reform

Hick idealizes the future of Christianity, while Nasr idealizes its past. And both would extend their respective idealizations beyond Christianity to ail the major religions of the world. So Hick invites Muslims and Jews to join his reform movement by making analogous reforms in their own creeds to annul the exclusivism he abhors, and Nasr is ,willing to defend the perennial wisdom to be found in shamanism

.Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, etc., as traditionally taught and practiced

Divine and Human Elements of Religion

The fundamental difference between the ways Hick and Nasr view religion in general is that while Hick sees it as a human phenomenon, Nasr sees it as divine revelation. Likewise, Schleiermacher considers the essence of religion to lie in religious experience, while for Schuon the marrow of all religion is to be found in transcendent reality. (۱)Thus it is that, for Hick, differences among religions are to be explained in terms of the different human reactions to the Real, while, for Nasr, the differences among religions are explained in terms of the different manifestations through which .the Real presents Itself

It would seem that both positions are rather extreme. Hick seems to err by making religion too much of a human construct, although he rejects the ideas of Durkheim, Marx and Freud, according to whom religion is entirely determined by social, economic or psychological factors. Hick contends that religion is a genuine response to the Real, but it is a human response to the real whose form is determined by .humans rather than God, while Nasr seems to think that it all must be divine

If we must fall into error, it would seem more pious to accept the position offered by Nasr, for true religion teaches that there is a sense in which everything that takes lace does so by the will of God, and that revealed truth is sent by God rather than constructed by human factors. Ultimately, however, a middle

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۱ - See Huston Smith's introduction to The Transcendent Unity of Religions, revised .edition, xxi-xdii

course must be found between –the views of Hick and Nasr if we realize that there are human constructions as well as divine revelations contained in the religious .traditions of mankind

They are not to be equalized by the two false claims that the religions are all completely human constructions or completely divine manifestations. Even if the light of divinity shines through all the major religious traditions, this does not mean that the intensity of the light is the same in all of them. Even if each star, in its own system of planets, is a sun, this does not make all such suns equal in luminosity and the ability to .support spiritual life

Furthermore, even if Christianity was at one time the most luminous of divinely revealed religions, this does not mean that it has been able to maintain its original .intensity even within its own world throughout the course of its history

Hick is right to assert that religious differences may reflect differences in human attempts to confront the Real, but he is wrong to think that the Real cannot purposefully make Itself manifest in different, even apparently contradictory ways, and hence that all difference must have its source in human fabrications. Hick presents his religious pluralism with the Kantian contrast between the noumenon and the phenomena, with the Real, or Ultimate Reality, playing a noumenal role and .religion being considered as phenomenal

If we look at the history of Western philosophy after Kant, we see that German idealism

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was based on the observation that Kant's noumena had become so cut off-from phenomenal reality that nothing would be lost by its elimination. If Hick is unable to defend his noumenon better than Kant, we should be left with religion as nothing more than a product of culture, rather than as a vehicle to the divine.(۱)

Nasr is right to insist that the religions as revealed by God are different crystallizations of the divine message; but he is wrong to think that because of this, the doctrines accepted by the major religious traditions today are all divinely sanctioned.

Both Hick and Nasr advocate forms of religious relativism, yet the forms of relativism they favour are not as extreme as could be imagined. Both seek to preserve some sense of the absolute quality of each of the religious world views, but, to use Schuon's phrase, it is only the relatively absolute that is to be found in the manifestations of the specific religious traditions. Neither is willing to allow a potpourri religion gathered from various creeds according to taste. Both see themselves as defenders of their respective traditions against the onslaughts of modern skepticism.

Is Traditional Christian Dogma Divine?

The argument Nasr gives in his discussion with Hick for the God-given character of traditional Christianity, however, is atrocious. With respect to the question of whether Jesus (`a) is the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, he asks rhetorically:

If this was simply a mistake, how could God allow, with His infinite wisdom and justice, one of the major

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۱- This point is also made by Roger Trigg, “Theological Realism and Antirealism,” in A Companion to Philosophy of Religion, Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, eds., (Oxford: Blackwell, ۱۹۹۷), ۲۱۹.

religions of the world within which millions of people have sought their salvation, to be misguided for two thousand years? Was this simply a mistake? If one says that this (was all a horrendous mistake for this thousand years, I cannot accept this.(١)

This seems to imply that Nasr thinks that a non-relativistic approach to religious truth .would be incompatible with traditional claims about the wisdom and justice of God

However, it is not unjust for God to allow a tradition to persist in error if either the error is the result of punishable voluntary sin or the error is excusable due to ignorance or inability and will not be punished. On the other hand, it is not contrary to divine wisdom for God to allow a tradition to persist in error for two thousand years if there is some benefit to creation to be gained by allowing this, even if that benefit is not known to man. Theodicies have often explained the wisdom in God's failure to .prevent sin by alluding to the value of voluntary human choice

The emphasis placed by Nasr on the number of those in error and the length of duration of the error also seems misplaced. Surely such quantitative factors have no .bearing on the metaphysical issue at hand

Distinctions

The issue of the existence of conflicting religious views will be further clarified if we keep in mind two aspects of the divine will: the ontological (takwini) and the legislative (tashri`i). If Christians have worshipped the Trinity for

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١- "Religions and the Concept of the Ultimate," ٢٧٢.

many centuries, then this must accord with the will of God, but only in the ontological .sense. It need not by any means accord with the legislative sense of the divine will

God permits the existence of many things which are contrary to His commands and ordinances, for He permits us to sin. The permission here is purely ontological and does not imply moral or religious permission. From the existence of religious beliefs .contrary to Islam, without fallacy one cannot infer that God condones such beliefs

Further distinctions that must be kept -in mind if we are to avoid confusion and fallacy are the difference between containing the truth and being a vehicle of salvation and the difference between each of this and being ordained by God for man in the present .age

According to the Qur'an, all divinely revealed religions contain truth and light, but this does not mean that they are equal; it does not mean that during the present age they are all suited to bring salvation; and it does not mean that some previously ordained religions have not become divinely proscribed. Nasr seems to betray some confusion :with respect to these distinctions when he writes

There is many a soul who cannot retain faith in his or her own religion at the expense of considering the followers of all other religions as being damned and who is intelligent enough to detect in the sacred art, doctrines, and rites of other traditions (the seal of the Divine.(۱

On the assumption

.Religion and the Order of Nature, ۱۴ -۱

that God has ordained different religions at different periods of history due to the changing social and historical circumstances and given that the sole ordained religion for the current age is Islam, we should also expect the intelligent to detect the seal of the Divine in the previously ordained religions or what remains of them. But the divine origin of a religion must not be mistaken for divine permission to practice that religion .today, or to accept the doctrines now associated with that religion

If one accepts a religion of divine origin previously ordained in preference to Islam because of prejudice or a fanatical attachment to one's own cultural traditions, this is rebellion against God and leads to perdition instead of salvation, regardless of the fact that one may be especially attached to the esoteric dimensions of one's favoured creed. On the other hand, there is no need to deny that God may grant guidance leading to salvation to those who through no fault of their own are unable to accept the truth of Islam. God's infinite mercy is certainly compatible with the fact that He has bestowed the most perfect version of His revelations upon the last of His chosen .messengers

?Why Is There Religious Diversity

Now we can return to the question of why there is religious diversity. According to Hick, the reason for diversity is that different cultures produce different genuine .responses to their confrontations with the Real

According to Nasr, God purposefully manifests Himself in ways appropriate to different cultures in order

to be understood in the various cultures, in order to perform functions in accordance with the divine plan at the locale of revelation, and in order to maintain the differences between human communities. Nasr asserts, “The different religions, I believe, are to confirm the separate existence of various human collectivities.”(١)

In this vein, Schuon contends that there are national or racial predilections for some forms of religious expression.(٢) Each divine manifestation or revelation is meant exclusively for a specific community in which it becomes relatively absolute.

While there is much insight in the explanation advanced by Nasr, and while it is certainly an improvement over the cultural relativism suggested by Hick, it fails to lead us completely out of the woods. A more satisfactory explanation of religious diversity would give greater emphasis to the idea that it should be part of the divine plan that successive revelations build upon the spiritual ground won through what had come before.

To explain religious diversity, it is not enough to consider differences in cultures and the roles played in the various cultures by the major religions, for this way of looking at things neglects the dynamic element in human spirituality and religion. As history unfolds and cultures evolve and degenerate, the prospects for the human appreciation of various forms of divine revelation will change.

So, instead of explaining religious diversity analogously to ethnic diversity, as Hick does, we should follow the lead of Nasr and Schuon and seek to explain religious diversity as required

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١- “Religions and the Concept of the Ultimate,” ٢٧٩.

٢ - See, for example, his remarks on how Lutheranism is more appropriate than Catholicism for the temperaments of many Germanic peoples in his Christianity/Islam.

by differences in manifestation which God arranges to accord with cultural differences, but then we should go further and seek to understand these differences in manifestation as part of a historical process through which God realizes His plan for .humanity

Spiritual wayfaring is not a journey for individuals alone, for human spirituality as such has a course to follow; and if, as the sophia perennis suggests, there are cycles in this course, patterns that repeat themselves, there can be ascension, as well. We need not be running around in mere circles; it may be that God calls on us to look with greater insight to His signs each time they are repeated so that we might spiral .upward toward Him

Seven Reasons to Deny the Cultural Relativity of Religion

point

The claim that divine manifestations are meant by God exclusively for the specific communities in which they appear is incompatible with the following facts: (۱) cultural diversity within religions, (۲) religious diversity within cultures, (۳) the phenomenon of conversion, (۴) revealed claims to universality, (۵) revealed invitation to members of other communities to join the new faith, (۶) doctrinal contradictions between religions, and (۷) practical contradictions between religions. More specifically, as these facts pertain to Islam they appear to be incompatible with the explanation of religious .diversity offered by Nasr

Cultural Diversity Within Religions (۱

Cultural diversity comes to exist within a single religious community as that community spreads geographically and is extended over different periods of human history. Nasr attempts to explain the elements of love and sacrifice in Christianity as divine responses to the Greco-Roman

heritage of sophism and skepticism during the period leading up to the birth of Christ (`a). However, Christianity has taken root in times and places where the Greco-Roman legacy has little or no influence.

Islam thrives in Indonesia just as well as in Egypt, and over periods of time when the major cultural influences have altered radically. These cultural differences within religious communities are at least as great as the differences which occur between religious communities. Hence, diversity among religions cannot be explained solely in terms of the need to preserve distinct cultures or serve some limited cultural aim.

Religious Diversity Within Cultures (۲

Likewise, within a single cultural milieu there may be very different forms of religious life. Jews and Christians in New York participate in a common culture influenced largely by consumerism and the entertainment industries, although their theological perspectives remain quite different and exhibit no tendency to merge into a single Judeo-Christian sect.

So, the religious diversity in New York which exists between Jews and Christians cannot be explained in terms of God's need to address people of different cultures differently. New York, of course, is merely one example among many in which religious differences cut across a single culture.

Conversion (۳

As someone who has converted to Islam, I personally take offense to the suggestion that religious affiliation is to be understood as similar to ethnicity.

Although it sometimes happens that the members of a religious community will fail to propagate their faith except by reproduction, this is generally a mark of degradation in the community

.whose faith teaches that its truths have been revealed for all mankind

As contemporary men and women begin to shrug off the illusions of communism and atheistic humanism and wake up to the living religious communities around them, they will have to make difficult choices about religious commitments with which considerations of personal ancestry can provide no standard. If the vast majority of men content themselves with what is familiar to them, the fact that this practice is .widespread is no justification for it

The fact that conversions do take place provides ample evidence for the fact that people are capable of making judgments about the comparative merits of different religions. Of course, this is not to say that those who convert always have good reasons to support their choices. As people all around the world are becoming more informed about religious traditions, conversions are taking place with increased .frequency

In America since the ۱۹۶۰'s, religious communities have been set up and sustained by American converts to various forms of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. New forms of Christianity have also won converts. Conversion need not involve a crossing from one religious tradition to another. Christians appropriately refer to the commitments of .those said to be "born again" as conversions

As conversions of different sorts become more common, seekers must attempt to avoid error by using a combination of reason and insight the like of which is generally valued iii coming to weighty decisions and evaluating competing claims. No one wants his

.or her own religious conversion to be frivolous

Buddhism, Christianity and Islam have begun their careers with invitations and conversions, and so have many denominations within these and other religious traditions. Conversion often involves entrance into a community to which one had been alien. If such conversion is ever valid, the message of revelation cannot be .interpreted as being intended exclusively for those within the community

Revealed Claims To Universality (۴

At least in the case of Islam, the universal proclamation is plain. The Qur'an is not a mere dead letter of historical interest pertaining to seventh century Arabia. It speaks :to all who would engage its text

هُوَ الَّذِی أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُ بِالْهُدَیٰ وَدِینِ الْحَقِّ لِیُظْهِرَهُ عَلَی الدِّینِ کُلِّهِ وَلَوْ کَرِهَ الْمُشْرِکُونَ

It is He Who sent His Apostle with guidance and the religion of the Truth, that He may “ (cause it to prevail over all religions, even if the idolaters detest it.” (۹:۳۳)(۱

To read these words as having only a relatively absolute meaning and not an absolutely absolute meaning deprives contemporary Muslims from being guided by the Qur'an. If the words, “to prevail over all religions,” are interpreted as meaning all religions in the world of seventh century Arabian culture alone, then the Qur'an .ceases to speak to us today

Furthermore, such an interpretation does not seem consistent with the understanding of the Prophet (s) himself. For he sent emissaries to distant lands inviting those there to Islam (see below). The mission entrusted to the Prophet of :Islam (s) is universal

إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مُنْذِرٌ ۖ وَلِکُلِّ قَوْمٍ هَادٍ

Verily, you“

١- Similar to this are (٤٨:٢٨) and (٦١:٩). Also see (٢:١٩٣), (٨:٣٩), and (٣:١٩).

(are a Warner and a guide unto every people.” (١٣:٧

The Qur'an itself, though revealed more than fourteen centuries ago, has reached us today, and speaks to us, inviting us to Islam and forbidding us from taking up other :ways

وَأَنَّ هَٰذَا صِرَاطِي مُسْتَقِيمًا فَاتَّبِعُوهُ ۖ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا السُّبُلَ فَتَفَرَّقَ بِكُمْ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ وَصَّاكُمْ بِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

And verily this is My path, the straight one, so follow it and do not follow other paths“ for they will scatter you from His path; this He enjoins upon you that you may be (wary.” (۶:١۵٣

The Invitation to Others (۵

The Quran enjoins the believers to invite others to the faith, and cautions against pointless disputing with them. Different revelations had been given to different peoples, but they are expected to recognize the divine source of Islam and to heed its .invitation

لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ جَعَلْنَا مَنْسَكًا هُمْ نَاسِكُوهُ ۖ فَلَا يُنَازِعُنَّكَ فِي الْأَمْرِ ۚ وَادْعُ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ ۖ إِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ هُدًى مُسْتَقِيمٍ

Unto every people have We prescribed tire rites of devotion which they .observe, so“ they should not dispute with you about the affair. So call unto your Lord. Indeed, you ` ` (are on the right way.” (٢٢:۶٧

What is of interest in this verse is that despite the affirmation of the fact that the rites of different peoples have been divinely prescribed, they are not to dispute with the Prophet (s) about such things, and he is ordered to call them to the Lord. So, the Prophet (s) is to call people to whom previous rites were prescribed and they

.are not to argue with him about it

وَكَذَٰلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا

And thus have We made you a group of middling stand that you may be witnesses“ (unto mankind and tire Prophet be a witness unto you; (۲:۱۴۳)”(۱

Here the universality of Islam is implied by the idea that the Muslims are to bear witness to all mankind, rather than to the people of a specific time or place. If it is objected that what is meant by “mankind” here is restricted to those who lived in the time and environs of the Prophet (s), the following ayah ,makes it clear that the warning is intended not merely for those addressed by Prophet (s), but for all to whom :the message of the Qul'an reaches, regardless of cultural background

قُلْ أَيُّ شَيْءٍ أَكْبَرُ شَهَادَةً قُلِ اللَّهُ شَهِيدٌ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكُمْ وَأُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ هَٰذَا الْقُرْآنُ لِأُنْذِرَكُمْ بِهِ وَمَنْ بَلَغَ

Say: God is witness between me and you; and this Qur'an has been revealed to me“ (that ۱ may warn you with it and whomsoever it reaches.” (۶:۱۹

In addition to exhortations to warn and invite others, the Qur'an itself directly addresses the Jews and Christians, calling upon them to embrace the final revelation of God.(۲) The Qur'an presents itself as the final revelation to pronounce judgment over that about which those communities to whom revelations had previously been .given have come to disagree

These verses display an historical awareness incompatible with the idea that

.(Also see (۱۶:۱۲۵), (۴۲:۱۵), and (۲۸:۸۷ -۱

The People of the Book are directly called upon at (۳:۶۴), (۳:۷۰), (۳:۹۸), (۴:۴۷), (۴:۱۷۱), -۲ .((۵:۱۵) and (۵:۷۷) and many other verses. The Jews are directly addressed at (۶۲:۶

each of the religions forms its own separate community destined by God to remain in isolation from the others. Those of understanding from each religious community are .invited to accept Islam as the culmination of that which they already believe

If the revelation of Islam itself seeks to trespass over the ground claimed for other religions, it cannot be properly understood relativistically as confining itself to a single cultural world. Further proof that the message of the Qur'an is addressed to humanity in its totality, and not only the humanity at large in seventh century Arabia, may be found in the Prophet's own (s) understanding of his mission, expressed in his dispatch of emissaries to Byzantium and Persia with letters proclaiming the universal call to .Islam

Consider, for example, the following letter reportedly sent to the Byzantine Emperor :Heraclius

"In the Naive of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate"

From: Muhammad, servant of Allah and His prophet. To: Heraclius the Great of .Byzantium

.Peace be to those who follow guidance

I invite you with the invitation of Islam. If you submit, it is to your benefit, for if you submit Allah will give you two rewards. If you turn this down, then upon you will be the .error of your peasants

قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَىٰ كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا نَعْبُدَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَلَا نُشْرِكَ بِهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُنَا بَعْضًا أَرْبَابًا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ ۚ فَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَقُولُوا اشْهَدُوا بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ

O People of the Book! Come to a word between us and between you

that we worship none but Allah and shall riot associate anything with Him and some of us shall not take others for lords other than Allah. And if they turn back, then say: Bear (witness that we are Muslims."(۱

(Seal:] Muhammad, Rasul Allah"(۲]

Not only does this letter show that the Prophet (s) understood his calling as a universal mission, not to be confined to any particular cultural context, it also shows that he understood the message of the Qur'an to be likewise universal, speaking not only to .the People of the Book on the Arabian peninsula, but in distant lands as well

Doctrinal Contradictions (۶

One of the major problems faced by any form of pluralism-including the form of pluralism accepted in the Qur'an, according to which various religions were sent by Allah to His messengers in different times and places- is what to make of the apparent contradictions among the creeds of the different religions. Various means to .resolve the contradictions are suggested in the Qur'an itself

There is the claim that adulteration of the original revelations has taken place, both purposefully and due to forgetfulness.(۳) It is also claimed that what was revealed to the different prophets was the same, so that the contradictions among creeds must (be due to content apart from what was revealed.(۴

Religious differences are generally explained in the Qur'an as having arisen from sin: from pride in the partial truth each of the different groups has possessed and from envy.(۵) What is not found in the Qur'an is

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۱- (۳:۶۴)

۲- My translation from Muhammad Hamidullah's collection, Al Watha'iq al siyasiyyah .(Beirut: Dar al-Nafas, ۱۹۸۷), ۱۰۷-۱۱۰

۳- (See (۲:۷۵), (۳:۷۸), (۵:۱۳), (۵:۴۱.

۴- ۱۴-۱۳:۴۲), (۴:۱۵۰), (۳:۸۴), (۲:۱۳۶) See).

۵- ۱۴:۴۲), (۳۰:۳۲), (۲۳:۵۳), (۳:۱۸) See).

the claim that the differences in religious creeds and their splitting into sects is a matter of indifference, or that it is a mere effect of cultural differences like .differences among languages

The explanation given by Hick for conflicts in doctrinal statements is that they arise from different ways of reacting to the Ultimate Reality. Contradictions among these claims are to be minimized through the recognition of their cultural relativity, and it is only the absolute forms of doctrinal statements that seem to be in conflict with this .relativism which need to be revised

It is for this reason that Hick is willing to call for a reform of Christianity with the claim that Christ (`a) should not be identified with God as the Second Person of the Trinity, who sacrificed his human life so that men may be saved from sin. Hick is willing to reform such aspects of Christianity because he considers them to be incompatible with the relativity of religious truth and with the idea that salvation is possible outside .Christianity

For Nasr, on the other hand, contradictions among different religious doctrines are explained by the hypothesis that God has revealed Himself in contradictory ways in different cultural settings. Truth becomes relative, for Nasr, not according to the .measure of man, but according to the variations in the divine measure

Contradictions among the doctrinal claims of different religions may occur on various levels. Sometimes the differences are speculative. Different sects may associate ,themselves with different theories of the divine attributes

or human freedom, or salvation, etc. These sorts of differences can be quite disruptive and have sometimes led to sectarian splits, such as the split between Mu'tazilites and Ash`arites over divine justice, or the disagreement between Lutherans and Calvinists over the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but reconciliation in such matters, even if precluded by entrenched commitments, are not .inconceivable

Some differences, however, are so fundamental and concern elements of creed so essential that reconciliation seems impossible. Such is the difference between Christians and Muslims about the crucifixion. It is a matter of objective historical fact that Christ did not die on the cross or that he did die on the cross. For the vast majority of Christian denominations, the crucifixion is a necessary element of Christianity whose historical reality is taken to be established way beyond any reasonable doubt. Muslims, on the other hand, must deny the crucifixion because this denial is directly .revealed by God in the Qur'an

Dr. Nasr, however, holds out hope for reconciliation even here, although the price to be paid is a rather extreme form of relativism about the truth. No one will have any trouble understanding that according to Christians the crucifixion truly did occur and according to Muslims it did not. This uncontroversial fact may be expressed in a rather misleading way when one intends to convey this point by saying that the proposition that the crucifixion occurred is true for Christians and false for Muslims. Here the expression "true for

".X' should be interpreted as meaning "true according to A" or "true in Xs opinion

But what Nasr intends is something much more controversial. He offers an analogy with perception. Things look different from different angles. The example he gives is that of listening to a piece of music by Bach. It will mean different things for people with different backgrounds. But the question at hand is not how the events that took place at Calvary are to be interpreted; rather there is disagreement about the historical events themselves. Sometimes the occurrence of events may depend upon perspective, as thunder may be said to have crashed loudly or murmured softly .depending on the place from which it is heard

According to Einstein's theory of relativity, simultaneity is not an objective fact, but depends on the perspective from which it is described. According to what Nasr says, religious truth must be something like Einstein's simultaneity. Given his dismissive attitude toward the historical documentation to which Hick refers in support of his claim that Jesus (`a) did not believe he was God, Nasr seems to think that the historical events at Calvary do not determine the truth of the religious claims about what did or did not happen there. Here Nasr joins company with the founder of neo-orthodox Christian theology, Karl Barth, who held that the truth of Christianity is .completely independent of the historical truth of the events described in the Bible

So, when we ask whether Christ (a) really died on

the cross, Nasr will respond that from his own perspective as a Muslim, the answer is no, but that it is equally correct that the answer is yes from the perspective of Christianity. From the perspective of objective history, it is not possible to gather enough evidence to decide the issue one way or another, but even if it could be shown definitively exactly what happened at Calvary, what would be shown would be a mere worldly truth that could in no way nullify either of the religious truths taught by .Christianity or Islam

This sort of relativism is either implausible or detrimental. If the sole reason for accepting the account sketched of religious truth is to remove apparent contradictions among religions, it becomes implausible because it is question begging. We are to believe that all the religions are saying the same thing in essence, yet whenever there appears to be evidence to the contrary in the form of contradictory truth claims, we are told that religious truth is relative. Even if independent reasons for a Barthian approach to religious truth are accepted and extended so as to validate all the major religions, the relativism thus won will be detrimental to religion itself, as (the critics of Barth have pointed out.(۱

In order for religion to engage itself with the world, its truths must be worldly truths as well as divine, and in order for religion to assert the supremacy of the divine truths in its revelation over human opinion, the

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۱- See Hans Urs Von Balthasar, The Theology of Karl Barth (San Francisco: Ignatius, .(۱۹۹۲

statement of these truths as revelation must weigh more heavily than secular standards of historical evidence will allow. It is not enough to give divine statements a lofty position within the religious language game. Engagement with religion requires .that religious truth spill over to re-orient any other game we might like to play

If realism about religious truth is abandoned, we seem to be left with nothing but sacred myths. If religion does not speak the absolute truth, if it is reduced to a set of collections of edifying and even enlightening stories, the urgency of the religious call .will be lost

It is important to see exactly where the difficulty in the relativist position occurs. The naive reaction is to firmly assert that logic prohibits the truth of contradictories, and hence that the conflicting claims made by Muslims and Christians cannot all be true. The relativist, however; expects this reaction and has a ready response: religious claims are not true or false simpliciter, rather they are true or false only relative to some interpretive religious framework, just as some succession of sounds may form .a true sentence in one language and a false sentence in another

The proper rejoinder of the theological realist should not be that such a position is incoherent, but rather that there is no good reason to accept it, and that it conflicts with religious self-understanding. When Christians and Muslims disagree about what happened on Calvary, they do not mean that they merely have different parables in

their respective traditions, but that they have different ideas about a single historical .truth

Finally, the locus of the relativist position is questionable. The relativist seems to view all the religions from outside and from that neutral vantage sees that they are all relatively true. For the proponents of sophia perennis the neutral vantage point is the esoteric dimension of all religions, which is unique. However, there is no access to the esoteric dimension independent of the exoteric aspects of each religion; and this is a .point Schuon and Nasr seem prepared to accept

Now, if we cannot make any authoritative claims about the esoteric truth of religion in general except relative to an exoteric tradition, contradictions in doctrine will not cancel out in a neutral interior of the essence of religion. We cannot say that from the point of view of the esoteric perennial truth it is neither true nor false that Christ died on the cross, for we cannot make statements on behalf of the esoteric except through .the vehicle of the exoteric

From the point of view of the interior of Islam, we may be able to reach an understanding of the spiritual significance within Christianity of the redemptive suffering of Jesus (`a), but ultimately, the Christian view will be seen as flawed. God may even guide Christians to Himself through the very misapprehensions that flaw Christianity, but the perfection of the spiritual truths which do remain at the esoteric level in Christian faith are to be found

.in esoteric Islam rather than in generic esoteric

When we see that conflicts in exoteric doctrine have reverberations in the esoteric aspects of the religions, we must also see that doctrinal differences cannot be as easily discarded as the rind of an orange. Differences in the nature of the rinds of oranges, lemons and limes are signs that the fruits inside also differ. Doctrinal conflicts occur precisely because religions are not each addressed exclusively to a .single community

If the differences were confined to culturally relative matters, there would be no possibility of contradiction, just as there is no contradiction between the claims that verbs generally precede their objects in English, and tend to follow them in Persian. When doctrinal differences take the form of contradiction, this indicates that the .proponents of each term of the contradiction disagree

Each implicitly claims that the way the other sees things is wrong; and to confine the differences exhibited by the religions to their exoteric dimensions is to fail to appreciate that exoteric differences can have esoteric implications. Allowance should be made that views expressed within the various religious traditions of the world may, after all, be profound. To relativise all doctrinal differences to cultural or communal differences is to confine these differences to a superficiality which is denied by the .religions at both esoteric and exoteric levels

Practical Contradictions (۷

No less important than the doctrinal contradictions among religious traditions are the practical contradictions. One religion orders its followers to abstain from meat, while another demands ritual animal

sacrifice. Islam demands prayer in the direction of Mecca, while Christianity pays no attention to the issue of geographical direction. The issue of the direction of prayer is especially helpful for clarifying the position of Islam with regard to the plurality of (religions.(١

The change in qiblah from Jerusalem to Mecca marks a turning point in the revelation of Islam at which the Muslims became clearly distinct from the Jews and Christians of Madinah, who were invited to accept the new revelation and its prophet (s). At the same time, it is admitted that each qiblah has had its own validity. Prayers offered by the Muslims facing Jerusalem prior to the change in qiblah were not in vain, and we are repeatedly reminded that God is not confined to any particular direction. The East and West belong to Him, and wherever you turn, there is the face of God.(٢) .Nevertheless, God obliges His servants to face Makkah

The point made here applies not only to the direction of prayer, but to the practical orientation of the religious life in general. Ways of life other than those commanded by Islam were previously ordained, and they were valid ways for reaching God. In another sense, we are led to God no matter what way of life we follow, for ultimately we are brought before Him to be judged. Different ways of life, however, have been deemed appropriate at different times and in different cultures in response to the needs of which

God appointed His various

١- See (٢:١۴٢)

٢- (٢:١١۵).

prophets (`a). Islam, however, in the final form in which it has been revealed, is not to be superseded in the course of time nor confined to a specific corner of the globe. It is sufficiently flexible to apply to all peoples. It is the only major religion whose founding revelation remains intact. Its basic practical commandments are not difficult to understand, and this path that it prescribes is one to which it invites all humanity.

Practical differences among cultures often are best explained relativistically. There are many ways in which respect may be shown to others, but these ways often depend on their being understood as such through social conventions. What is considered a sign of respect in one culture might cause offense in another.

The practical differences between the prescriptions of Islam and those of other religions, however, run deeper than this. There are disagreements about the way we should conduct ourselves in worship and in our relations with others. These disagreements are not treated in the Qur'an as being of no consequence. Instead we are told that among the children of Adam some communities are rightly guided and some have gone astray.(١)

Thus we find that the practical disagreements among religions, no less than their doctrinal contradictions, indicate that the differences among them are more than cultural variants. There are substantial differences between the ways of life allowed by Islam and those condoned in modern Christian societies. If we were to accept an explanation of these differences in terms of

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١- (٧:٣٠).

differences in temperament and cultural environment, the law of Islam would lose its' .moral force

The prescriptions of shari'ah provide guidance for the best way to live for all humanity. Other ways may be tolerated within the framework of the Islamic polity, as dhimmis have been given a large degree of latitude enabling them to live in accordance with their own laws. But Islam does not proclaim that it is a matter of indifference as to which law, Jewish, Christian or Muslim, one is to follow. Islam prescribes tolerance for other ways at the same time that it proclaims its own way as .commanded by God

Unfortunately, Jews, Christians and Muslims have been-and often continue to be-intolerant of one another. The remedy to this malady is not to stand back and claim that it does not matter which way one follows because all have been divinely ordained, as Nasr seems to suggest; nor can Muslims accept the remedy offered by Hick of a tolerance based on the idea that all the religions are mere human responses to the divine. Hick brings up the issue of religious war as a practical reason to accept religious pluralism, and the response given by Nasr is that most wars of the twentieth .century have arisen from secular rather than religious ideologies

Granting the point made by Nasr, we cannot deny that religious intolerance poses the threat of violence. In the face of this danger, however, it is neither correct nor sufficient to claim that no

religious supremacy is sanctioned by God. It is not correct for the theological reasons given above, that is, Islam emphatically proclaims its own supremacy to the other religions as the culmination of the divine guidance previously sent. It is not sufficient because true religious tolerance will only be achieved when men learn to respect the religious beliefs of those they consider to be mistaken. The key to tolerance is not the removal or relativisation of disagreement, but the willingness to accept genuine disagreement. For Muslims, any effective remedy to intolerance must be found in Islam itself, that is, the remedy is submission to the Will of God. We must learn to better appreciate and respect the tolerance prescribed by Islam if we are to be .worthy of calling ourselves Muslims

Conclusions

Nasr calls attention to the difference between the modern perspective on religion and the perspective internal to the religions themselves. It is from the modern perspective that the relativism of religious claims is enunciated. Here we find a clash between the modern and the religious viewpoints. Each makes a claim to ultimacy. The basis for the modern perspective defended by Nasr is insight into the esoteric dimensions of .the religions of the world, but it remains a human insight and speculation

The basis for the perspective internal to Islam, on the other hand, is divine revelation. To claim that the answer to modern questions about the religions is to be found in human speculative thought rather than in revelation is to

weaken the absolute authority of revelation in a way that threatens the ability of divine guidance to pour forth from revelation. The Qur'an gives its own reasons for the rejection of Islam: pride, envy, stubborn attachment to tradition, and deviation from previously revealed truths. Nowhere do we find the idea that God ordained a .refusal to accept Islam in order to preserve communities separate from the ummah

The traditional perspective found in Islamic thought that is lauded by Nasr does not itself provide any reason for the glorification of the traditional qua traditional. The characterization of a way or creed as traditional satisfies no criteria for rightness or truth. While much that is correct and true is to be found in the religious traditions of mankind, it is not in virtue of being traditional that ways and creeds become right and true, although in the historical processes through which traditions are formed we should expect the elimination of much that is wrong, and the achievement of genuine wisdom. If being traditional is no criterion for what is right and true, what are the ?proper criteria

Hick's answer is that there are two standards for grading religions: first, the religion must be effective in turning its followers from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness; second, the religion must promote good morals. Hick finds no reason to think that these criteria should not be satisfied by a Christianity purged of it traditional doctrines of the Incarnation and Redemption. The response by Nasr to this proposal is

that the result would be a break with Christian tradition rather than its reform. In this response, it appears that Nasr wishes to use tradition itself as a standard for .measuring religions

Nasr seems to come closer to the truth when he admits that there are levels of understanding. Instead of looking for a rigid formulation of a criterion to be used for assessing religious claims, we might do better to seek a process by which wisdom is achieved and truth uncovered. To recognize the divine, we are not to require the divine to conform to our preconceived notions; rather, we must purify ourselves of all .base elements that may cloud our vision

Although I have expressed grave misgivings about religious pluralism as defended by Hick and Nasr, I must also admit some misgivings about my own criticisms. John Hick, of all contemporary Christian theologians, seems to come closest to the formulation .of a Christology consistent with that of Islam

While Christians have taught that Jesus (`a) gave up his humanity on the cross to save the world, Hick argues that Christians must give up the divinity of Jesus (`a) in order to recognize the salvation made possible through the plurality of the world's .religions

So, whatever the failings of the program of religious pluralism lie has advanced, Hick deserves some recognition and encouragement for his attempts to reform Christian .teachings

The root of the failure of Hick's pluralism is that it makes religion into a purely human ,response to the divine

or the Ultimate Reality, while Islam teaches that religion is divinely revealed. This point also lies at the heart of the criticism Nasr presents to Hick; but Nasr seems to fall short of allowing revelation the absolute status it must possess if it is really understood as nothing less than God's direct communication to humanity.

On the other hand, Dr. Nasr is such a brilliant exponent of Islamic thought in the West that I cannot find fault with his views without feelings of trepidation. Perhaps I have not understood him correctly, or perhaps the views he expressed in the interview were not as well considered as those he would have put in writing himself.

Maybe a satisfactory answer to the criticisms I have raised can be found in the teachings of perennial philosophy. There is an interesting suggestion in Schuon's The Transcendent Unity of Religions. There he claims that every Revelation has the function of an esoterism in relation to the previous religious form.

Christianity, for example, is esoteric relative to the Judaic form and Islam relatively to the Judaic and Christian forms, though this is, of course, only valid when regarded from the special point of view that we are here considering and would be quite false if understood literally. Moreover, insofar as Islam is distinguished by its form from the other two monotheistic religions, that is, insofar as it is formally limited, these religions also possess an esoteric aspect relatively to it, and the same reversibility of relationship applies as

.between Christianity and Judaism

However, the relationship to which we referred first is a more direct one than the second, since it was Islam that, in the name of the spirit, shattered the forms that preceded it, and Christianity that shattered the Judaic form, and not the other way (around.(١

Here, at least, some grounds are given for the precedence of Islam over its predecessors. Islam not only shatters previous forms in the name of the spirit, however, it also imposes its own form in place of those it has shattered. It is that form, or exterior, which constitutes the gateway to its spirit, or interior, which, by virtue of its content and the position of Islam in the line of succession of revealed religions, is .more comprehensive than any other

Furthermore, Islam does not violate the truths of the previously revealed religions; rather it confirms them. What Islam shatters is what is false in the other religions because of corruption and deviation or because of the temporal limitations of their :validity

بَلْ نَقْذِفُ بِالْحَقِّ عَلَى الْبَاطِلِ فَيَدْمَغُهُ فَإِذَا هُوَ زَاهِقٌ ۚ وَلَكُمُ الْوَيْلُ مِمَّا تَصِفُونَ

Nay, but We hurl the Truth against falsehood so that it shatters its head and it (disappears; and woe unto you for what you attribute [to Him]. (٢١:١٨

Frithjof Schuon, The Transcendent Unity of Religions (New York: Harper Row, ١٩٧٥), -١ .٢٩

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In the name of Allah

هَلْيَسْتَوِيالَّذِينَيَعْلَمُونَوَالَّذِينَلَايَعْلَمُونَ
?Are those who know equal to those who do not know
al-Zumar: ٩

:Introduction
Ghaemiyeh Computer Research Institute of Isfahan, from ٢٠٠٧, under the authority of Ayatollah Haj SayyedHasanFaqihImami (God blesses his soul), by sincere and daily efforts of university and seminary elites and sophisticated groups began its activities .in religious, cultural and scientific fields

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:Appreciation

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